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ABSTRACT

A pilot study examined the kinds of comments made on oral interpretation ballots and whether the comments suggest a useful criteria for an effective oral interpretation performance. A total of 1,737 comments were recorded from 304 ballots from two forensics tournaments. Classifications of comments were created as ballots were analyzed. A total of 25 classifications were created. Results indicated that judges most frequently made comments in the following areas: vocal delivery, introduction, characterization, emotion, and physical delivery. Results also indicated that most of the time comments suggested a useful and appropriate criteria for an effective interpretation performance. However, specificity is often lacking in interpretation ballots. Further research should focus on specific events in the hopes of better understanding each of the oral interpretation arenas. (Contains 25 references and a table of data.) (RS)

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Critiquing the Critics: A Content Analysis of Oral Interpretation Ballots

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1

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One of the most important forms of feedback a student receives in forensic competitions is the ballot. The ballot serves to teach, guide and direct the student. It is the litmus test for the student's performance. It determines how a student finishes at a tournament as well as helping to point the student in a direction for future competitions. Pratt (1987) writes in his ballot analysis paper that the ballot serves two principal functions, "judging and coaching" (1). He defines judging as "evaluating a performance within a competitive context by applying a set of external and generally familiar criteria; the out come of judging in debate is win-loss decision with speaker points and, in individual events is a rank and rating" (1). He goes on to explain that coaching is "evaluating a performance within an educational context by making comments on its overall quality and by offering suggestions for improvement in later performances" (1). Pratt emphasizes that a judge's explanation on the ballot may increase the likelihood of understanding. With this much importance resting on the ballot, it is imperative that a ballot serve its purpose and be written with thoughtfulness and care. Unfortunately, some judges take this for granted, others, due to a lack of attention, time or experience (or other outside interferences) may write ballots that fall short of their instructional potential. Poor ballots are those that are not helpful to the student in determining why they received the rank that they did or how they can further improve their performances. "Nice job" is a positive comment, but it does not really explain

rank/rate or give suggestions for improvement.

This paper focuses on a pilot study that analyzes oral interpretation ballots collected. It outlines the average number and classifications of comments found on ballots. Finally, the paper discusses implications of this study on judging behaviors in oral interpretation events.

Literature Review

A great deal of research focusing on the use of the individual event ballots can be found in forensic literature. More specifically, a number of studies focus specifically on interpretation standards, as well as ballot writing in individual events.

Analysis of Individual Event Ballots: General

A number of scholars have discussed the comments made by judges on ballots and have analyzed the effectiveness of ballot content and how to improve a person's ballot writing skills. Olson and Wells (1988), stress the importance of a properly written ballot. Through their ballot analysis, they determined that a good ballot should be thoughtful and thorough and should contain a reason for decision. They emphasize that judges need to realize the importance of what they are writing and how the ballot will be used, being careful to structure their comments

towards ideas for improvements. Olson and Wells also cite Hanson's (1987) statement of a good judge (based on students' opinions): "A good judge writes comments that are concrete, helpful, truthful and are in a sufficient amount that you can learn from them" (20). Olson and Wells then point out that following these guidelines will help bolster a judge's credibility in the eyes of the competitors. Their method focuses on the comments made and their helpfulness and the need for a reason for decision on every ballot. They conclude that guidelines are necessary in individual events to help better the ballot and to help increase the learning that a student can gain from reading the ballot. Their final emphasis is for every judge to justify all of the comments that they make on the ballot.

Many other scholars have conducted similar ballot analyses. Jensen (1988, 1990) outlines another method in his studies of ballot comments. He focuses on the number of comments made on original speaking ballots, as well as on the categories of the same comments. Each time he choose as his criteria ballots with and without event-specific criteria on them. Jensen argues that as opportunities continue to open up to students, so too does the responsibility and role of the individual events critics. Jensen argues that this role is an important one and that judges should take responsibility for it. Jensen also agrees that event criteria is needed to assist judges in their writing of the ballot and their critiquing of the round, but takes the suggestion a step further and suggests that guidelines should be

event specific. Jensen concludes by stating that ultimately it is the responsibility of the judge to write a good ballot and that most judges are on the "right track to providing students with a positive forensics experience" (156).

Pratt (1987) also examined ballots written for prepared speeches in order to "judge the judges." The method that he selected enabled him to first count the ballots and code them on several levels, and then identify the format in which the ballot was written (sentence or sentence fragment). He coded the topic of each unit as one of four mutually exclusive categories. He went on to code the ballots for advice and for an explanation of ranking and rating. Pratt's effort in analyzing the ballots was to discover how the judges are doing when writing their ballots. He decided that the judges should receive a grade of B+, as he found the ballots on the whole to be "thorough, balanced and helpful" (7). He also suggested that we explain our final evaluations more consistently, and to always keep the audience members, their needs and their interests in mind as we construct our ballots.

A number of other scholars researched and designed or studied methods which are helpful in determine how to write a proper ballot and what critics are currently putting on their ballots (Congalton and Olson, 1995; Dean, 1988; Dickmeyer, 1994, 1997; Hanson, 1987; Hanson, 1989; Jones, 1988; Nicolai, 1987; Olson and Wells, 1988; Olson, 1989; Olson, 1992; Perlich, 1994; Pratt, 1987; Preston, 1983; Preston, 1990; Renz, 1991; Tucker,

1988; Wilcox, 1988). These studies can be useful for judges who would like to improve their ballot writing skills.

Analysis of Individual Events Ballots: Oral Interpretation

A number of scholars also looked specifically at interpretation events and performed ballot analyses to determine current practices and methods of improving. Trimble (1994), analyzing Cron-Mills' (1991) study, outlines nine guidelines for writing an effective ballot. He argues that by following the guidelines a person can become a better judge and write a more effective ballot for the student. Among the criteria that he gives for writing a good ballot are: writing a ballot, "flow" the performance, offer comments concerning the competitor's emotional and intellectual portrayal of the characters and avoid jargon, among others. Trimble explains Cron-Mills' method as one that analyzes comments on ballots in an effort to improve judges' ballots.

Nicolai (1989) was interested in coaches' and judges' attitudes towards interpretation events and the perceived standards that he believes exists. He took a different approach in his methodology; instead of relying on a ballot analysis, he used a telephone survey to acquire his results. One of the areas that he focused on was judging standards. He wondered if differences existed by regions and if there was national consensuses regarding events. He also looked at specific

criteria by event. Nicolai concluded in his study that more attention should be given to the distinct character of events.

Also interested in current practices and methods of improving, Dickmeyer (1994) conducted a ballot analysis in order to determine that if what should occur on ballots actually does occur. Dickmeyer argues that students learn on a number of levels and that one of the levels that is many times ignored is the ballot. Dickmeyer focuses his paper on what we, as judges, should be doing on our ballots. Dickmeyer's method was to interpret each ballot as a unit, as opposed to analyzing each comment as a separate unit. He determined, through using Cron-Mills/Trimble's guidelines, that no single ballot meets all of the criteria. He also states that judges need to address the concern that no regard for literature is taken into consideration when making performance choices. Dickmeyer further concludes that a major concern of coaches and judges is the "lack of emotional or intellectual depth an interpreter brings to a character," but that this concern is being ignored on the ballot by a large number of judges (11). Dickmeyer concludes by stating that judges should ensure that competitors derive the greatest educational benefits possible from the ballot and to do so, it is the responsibility of the judge to take this into consideration when constructing their ballot.

A number of other similar studies have been done to determine if judges are executing their duty as a ballot writer properly. Scholars have also studied perceived differences and

practices in interpretation events as well as the changing conventions of interpretation. There are a number of places that a person can go to extend their review of scholarship in forensic interpretation (Aspdal, 1997; Cox, 1989; Knapp, 1997; and Koeppel and Morman, 1991).

Methodology

Ballots for this study were collected in the fall of 1997 at two forensic tournaments--The University of Missouri-St. Louis and Middle Tennessee State University. After collecting ballots from all events, the study was focused onto interpretation events (prose, poetry, program, duo, and dramatic). A total of 304 ballots were analyzed, using a method similar to that employed by Preston (1983). Two pieces of information were recorded during analysis: (1) the number of comments made on each ballot, and (2) the classification of comments. For the purposes of this study, a comment is "any sentence, phrase, or single word that provides some critique of the speaker's performance or advice for improvement" (Preston, 1983, p. 2). As comments were recorded, classifications were created, such as 'characterization' or 'introduction' in order to determine the types of comments being made on interpretation ballots.

This study seeks to answer two research questions.

RQ1 What kinds of comments are made on oral interpretation ballots?

RQ2 Do comments made on oral interpretation ballots suggest a useful and appropriate criteria for an effective oral interpretation performance?

Results

A total of 1,737 comments were recorded from the 304 ballots analyzed, indicating a mean of 5.71 comments per ballot. Classifications of comments were created as ballots were analyzed. Each ballot that included a comment within a classification was recorded within that comment type. The study did not record the overall frequency of comments made per classification--only the number of ballots represented within each classification. A total of 25 classifications were created. While some of these categories appear to be subcategories of others, larger categories such as 'physical delivery' and 'vocal delivery' were created when critics' comments were generalizations. More specific comments resulted in the generation of specific classifications. (See Table One for a breakdown of classifications.)

Table One

Classification of Comments on Oral Interpretation Ballots

Classification of Comment	Number of Ballots	Percentage of Ballots
Vocal Delivery	142	.47
Introduction	106	.39
Characterization	106	.39
Emotion	104	.34
Physical Delivery	102	.34
Scriptbook	97	.32
Teaser	86	.28
Rate	79	.26
Literature	53	.17
Focal Points	52	.17
Imagery	51	.17
Memorization	42	.14
Ending	41	.05
Fluency Break	34	.11
Time	33	.11
Theme	22	.07
Cutting	21	.07
Encouragement	14	.05
Energy	14	.05
Transitions	14	.05
Clothing	10	.03
Message	8	.03
Range	7	.02
Variation in Selections	6	.02
Dialect	5	.02

When examining RQ1 "What kinds of comments are made on oral interpretation ballots", the following information, broken down into 25 categories, was found. Judges most frequently made comments in the following areas:

Vocal Delivery was mentioned on 142 ballots, which is .47 percent of the total analyzed ballots. Vocal delivery included any time a judge would make mention of vocalization or general vocal patterns. Specific vocal patterns received their own category.

Introductions were mentioned on ballots 106 times which is .39 percent of the total ballots. Any comment about the introduction is included in this category. Sometimes the comments were detailed about what a person liked or disliked. Other times comments were one word phrases describing their feelings about the introduction.

Characterization was mentioned on 106 of the ballots, which is again .39 percent of the total ballots. Comments were put into this category when mention was made about the character in general. Comments often described the character's persona as a whole, or offered general suggestion for character improvement.

Emotion was mentioned on 104 of the ballots which is .34 percent of the total ballots. Emotion comments included any comments dealing with the emotions that the performer is emoting (or not

emoting), the lack of emotion (or presence of emotion) that a judge is feeling or suggestions as to how a performer can add emotion to their piece.

Physical Delivery received mention on .34 percent of the ballots, which breaks down into 102 comments. Physical delivery comments include any comments that were made about physical delivery in general. Specific physical delivery comments are represented in the other categories.

Scriptbook received attention .32 percent of the time, or on 97 ballots. Comments that were placed in this category included comments regarding the opening or closing of the book, the way it is being held, that it is being used as a prop, that is isn't used often enough, that it should be included in the visual aspects of the piece (as a prop), how page turns are or should be executed, that items in the book are distracting, or any other mention of the actual book and its pages.

Teaser was mentioned on 86 ballots which is .28 percent. Like the introduction, any mention of the teaser, good or bad, long or short, were placed in this category.

Rate was mentioned .26 percent of the time, or on 79 ballots. Although rate could fit within the vocal delivery category, specific references to it, resulted in its own category.

Comments included, "too fast," "too slow," "rate should vary throughout piece," etc.

Literature received attention on 53 ballots, or .17 percent of the time. Comments that fit into this category included when a judge liked or disliked material, if the literature was too challenging, or not challenging enough, or any other general reference to the text itself.

Focal Points were mentioned on 52 ballots, which is .17 percent of the total. Comments in this category were again specific to focal points, such as making them wider, smaller, or having some. This category also could have fit into physical delivery, but since comments were given specific mention, the researcher felt that they merited their own category.

Imagery was found on 51 ballots, or .17 percent of the sample. Any comments about imagery in general were included in this category. Comments included bringing a piece to life, the need for imagery, the need for the student to "see" the piece, and many others along those lines.

Memorization was mentioned on 42 ballots, or .14 percent of the time. Any comments about memorization were placed in this category.

Ending of a piece was found on 41 ballots, or .05 percent of the total. Comments in this category ranged from "awesome ending" to long explanations about how important the right ending is to a piece to how an ending could be improved.

Fluency Breaks were mentioned .11 percent of the time or 34 ballots. Fluency breaks included any time there was a break or stumble in the performance.

Time received mention on 33 ballots, which breaks down to be .11 percent of the time. Comments were placed into this category that included mention about a piece being too short or too long, being over time, or any other general mention about time.

Theme showed up on 22 ballots, or .07 percent of the sample. Comments that fit in this category were ones that dealt with the themes in poetry or POI. Again comments were both positive and negative.

Cutting comments were found on 21 ballots, or .07 percent of the total. Comments relevant to this category were when a judge either liked or disliked a particular cutting choice that the performer had made or if the judge was familiar with the literature and suggested changes.

Encouragement Comments were found .05 percent of the time, or on

14 ballots. These comments focused on the performer sticking with the event or potential that the judge saw in the person. Comments herein are generally uplifting in nature.

Energy Comments were found on 14 ballots, equalling .05 percent. Any comments that mentioned energy specifically were put into this category.

Transitions were mentioned on 14 of the total ballots, or .05 percent. This category contains comments directed specifically at transitions either between pieces or scene.

Clothing Comments were made on 10 ballots, or .03 percent. Comments in this area included any mention of clothing, earrings, nail polish, make-up, professionalism in dress, etc.

Message was a comment on .03 percent, or 8 of the ballots. This category contains statements about messages contained within DI, Duo or Prose.

Range Comments were found on 7 ballots (.02 percent). These remarks dealt with the variety in a student's performance choices.

Variation in Selections was mentioned on 6 ballots for a total of .02 percent. Any suggestion that pieces were heard frequently,

or that selections in a program were too similar were put into this category.

Dialect Comments were on .02 percent of the ballots (5 total ballots). These comments included any remarks about accents.

When examining RQ2, "Do comments made on oral interpretation ballots suggest a useful and appropriate criteria for an effective oral interpretation performance," the researcher determined, based on remarks found on ballots, that most of the time comments do suggest a useful and appropriate criteria for an effective interpretation performance. At times, comments were found to be too vague for a performer to use in any way. At other times, the critics' lack of writing a ballot served as a hinderance. Some ballots only contained the dreaded "good job, 5-15" remarks. Upon overall examination of the ballots, the majority of adjudicators made at least some effort to help students to improve upon their performance. There were times when only certain aspects of what others have listed as criteria for a good ballot were met. Sometimes critics would only focus on one part of the performance, leaving the other facets unmentioned. As a whole, though, it appeared as if judges made an effort to suggest helpful criteria.

Discussion

When looking back at the different studies that have been done, this one is in agreement with existing literature. The researcher concluded that on a whole judges are doing a pretty good job, but that there is room for improvement. After surveying the ballots for comments, the researcher concurs with Trimble's analysis that not many judges meet all of the nine guidelines that Cron-Mills outlines. In fact, some only comply with one or two of the guidelines. For a number of reasons, judges often times do not write a "complete" ballot. A judge may be distracted with outside forces such as hunger or fatigue which may cause them to write an underdeveloped ballot. Pratt argues that many judges write their ballots immediately after each performance and then wait until the end of the round to rank and rate each person. He explains that it is unlikely that a judge will go back and further explain their ballot or write a reason for decision, usually because of tight tournament schedules (6). Even though some ballots have rooms for improvement, all in all interpretation ballots prove to be productive tools for facilitating student improvement. On the whole, judges try to use the ballot as an educational tool and even though some leave a bit to be desired, others make up for it. Plus, even if some ballots do not meet all of the guidelines, at least as a starting point, some productive comments are better than a blank ballot.

It is uplifting that critics are striving to write good

For instance, it is gratifying that only a small percentage of comments are directed at clothing in the study. However, remarks that are generalized such as vocal delivery are problematic. Vocal delivery supported by examples and explained explicitly are appropriate comments to make, but unexplained and not supported with examples, make that comment vague and hard to adapt to. Critic should strive to be as specific as possible with regards to their criticism. Results of this study suggest that such specificity is often lacking in interpretation ballots.

An informal finding not outlined in this study is that judges seem to repeat the same comments for different competitors numerous times. Not only in the same section, but on most of the ballots that they write. Leading a person to wonder how much thought goes into each individual ballot and each individual performance. Some people seem to fall into comfortable patterns and not want to stray from that norm.

Further research should focus on specific events in the hopes of better understanding each of our oral interpretation arenas.

As mentioned earlier, Hanson outlines the most important traits associated with a good judge, "writes concrete, helpful, truthful comments in a sufficient amount that you can learn from them" (20). He also states that it is "important for judges to try even harder to offer some comments which can lead to growth opportunities for the contestant" (18). In order to write a good ballot, a judge should take these ideas into consideration. A

critic should also support their remarks with explanation and examples, they should take the necessary time needed to write a thoughtful and helpful ballot, not worrying about being the first to finish. They should also write a reason for decision so that a student not only knows how their performance was, but why they received the rank and rate that they did. Finally, in constructing a good ballot, an adjudicator should take into consideration Cron-Mills nine guidelines (1.write a ballot, 2. divulge your philosophy of interpretation, 3. suspend evaluations of "literary merit" or "past experience", 4. "flow" the performance, 5. offer comments concerning the technical aspects of the presentation, 6. offer comments concerning the competitor's emotional/ intellectual portrayal of the characters, 7. avoid jargon, 8. don't ignore the primary issues, and 9. include constructive criticism). If a judge keeps all (or even part) of these suggestions in mind, as well as the education and growth of the students, they should be able to write an effective ballot.

Summary

When analyzing ballots collected from two tournaments and considering the other studies that have been done, it is apparent how important the construction of the ballot is. The ballot is the only thing that a competitor has to evaluate their performance at tournaments and if the judge does not take the needed time to write a thorough ballot, the student's performance

suffers, a coaches ability to coach is decreased and in general, pedagogy suffers. While it may seem like an unimportant task to some when they are in a hurry, tired or hungry, the lack of a properly written ballot can definitely hurt the student. Judges should take into consideration the need to write an informative ballot, one that follows criteria for the event, lists a reason for decision and that gives explanation for comments and judges' preference. So next time you are in a 8 am round and you skipped breakfast, remember that not writing an effective ballot is like your not having been there at all, so you would have gotten up at the crack of dawn and starved yourself for nothing.

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